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Dredging 101: The business of making beaches bigger

FORT MYERS, FL – At this time of year, chances are good you might look out from your beach and notice a large dredging ship scooping or sucking up sand from the ocean floor and transporting it back to shore to make your beach wider and safer. That's because winter is the most common time of year for dredging projects to be completed.

"Environmental restrictions cause the bulk of our work to be done in the winter months," says Great Lakes Dredge & Dock Vice President Bill Hanson. "The market in our industry has changed from working year-round to working six months or less of the year during the winter months."

Dredging is the underwater excavation of sand or sediment used for two reasons:

- **Beach nourishment projects** – Sand is moved from the ocean floor to the beach to create a wider beach that will serve as a buffer against the wrath of Mother Nature.
- **Navigation channels** – Dredging establishes or maintains a channel to keep it safe for the navigation of ships.

"Dredging for beach nourishment projects has an economic benefit of protecting the shoreline infrastructure," Hanson said. "A wide beach is the first line of defense against Mother Nature."

Great Lakes Dredge & Dock is the largest provider of dredging services in the United States. Its primary customer? The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. "We also work for local governments or private groups who have planned dredging projects," Hanson said. "No two beach nourishment jobs are alike – they can range in size from 50,000 cubic yards of sand to 5 million cubic yards, or from \$1 million to \$50 million."

Beach nourishment dredging projects generally call for the use of one of two different types of dredges:

- A hopper dredge is a propelled floating plant, basically a ship that dredges material, stores it onboard and transports it toward shore for unloading to the beach via a pipeline.
- A pipeline or cutter suction dredge sucks dredged material through a pipeline directly onto the beach.

Dredging is a risky, capital-intensive business, and the work can be dangerous. Dredging contractors are on the water at the most dangerous time of year, when harsh winter storms on the water can pose life-threatening situations. "We focus a lot of attention on the safety of our workers," Hanson said.

Details of the environmental impact of a beach nourishment project are worked out before the dredging starts in advance, to ensure the environmental assets of the beach will be left in better shape than before the project began.

Residents who live on or near a beach don't generally experience a great deal of disruption because of a beach nourishment project. The area being widened is usually roped off for safety. Residents will likely see the sand pipes coming out of the water, bulldozers on the beach moving sand around and dredging ships out at sea. They may also hear the bulldozer as it works to spread the sand, but they won't hear much from the dredging ship itself. "We work 24/7 – until the job is done," Hanson said. "We can generally advance 300-500 feet along a beach per day, so we move along pretty quickly."

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ABOUT ASBPA: Founded in 1926, the American Shore and Beach Preservation Association (ASBPA) represents the scientific, technical and political interests along the coast in an effort to shape national research and policy concerning shore and beach management and restoration. ASBPA strives to engage in a factual debate on coastal issues and economics that will foster sound, far-sighted and economical development and preservation of our beaches; thereby aiding in placing their beliefs within the reach of the largest possible number of people in accordance with the ideals of a democratic nation. For additional information about ASBPA, please visit www.asbpa.org.

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